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## Goal Attainment, Goal Striving, and Well-Being During the Transition to Adulthood: A Ten-Year U.S. National Longitudinal Study

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### Abstract

This study examines the relation between young adults' goal achievement, continued goal striving over time, and subsequent well-being. Analysis of a longitudinal subsample of a nationally representative U.S. study of 5,693 adolescents as they transition to adulthood revealed that individuals who met their goals had higher well-being, but that the relation between goal completion and well-being varied by goal content. Continued goal striving was related to well-being and maintained domain-specific self-efficacies, whereas goal disengagement was accompanied by declines in domain-specific self-efficacies. Overall, the results suggest that long-term goal striving is beneficial for well-being during the transition to adulthood.

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Failing to meet one's personal goals can result in disappointment and poor mental health (Nurmi, 1997). According to developmental theories of life-span control and self-regulation, some individuals experience disappointment and poor mental health (Nurmi, 1997). According to developmental theories of lifespan control and self-regulation, some individuals who fail to meet their goals engage in goal reconstruction as a way to cope (Heckhausen, 2005; Heckhausen & Schulz, 1999). Although it is clear that both goal completion and goal disengagement have implications for adjustment, less is understood about longitudinal patterns of self-regulatory strategies and well-being as they relate to goals in various domains of life pursuits, particularly across late adolescence and the transition to adulthood. In this chapter, we examine the implications of goal completion and disengagement from unmet goals during the transition to adulthood.

### Goal Striving

Goals serve as ideal states that individuals strive toward. There is a discrepancy between a goal and current reality, or between one's ideal self and actual self, and that discrepancy is a motivating force (Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1981; Higgins, 1987; Higgins, Loeb, & Moretti, 1995). Individuals can reduce the discrepancy by attempting to realize the ideal self through goal striving or by modifying the ideal self so that it is more similar to the real self (Brandtstadter & Rothermund, 2002). Heckhausen, Wrosch, and Fleeson (2001) demonstrated that when a goal can no longer be met,

individuals normatively engage in compensatory secondary control. This can involve reconstructing the goal or focusing on other goals, as well as ignoring or disregarding stimuli related to the unmet goal.

## Goals During Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

Nurmi (1993) suggests that goals are partly derived from socially acceptable and encouraged developmental tasks. For instance, many Americans have a goal of retirement around age sixty-five, which is a socially acceptable age and has historically been the age for receiving full government retirement benefits. Many goals during late adolescence relate to the developmental tasks regarding achievement and affiliation that help constitute the transition to adulthood (e.g., educational attainment, marriage). For example, adolescents hear their peers discussing college plans and are asked about their own college plans, and those social interactions help adolescents determine their goals for educational attainment.

During adolescence and emerging adulthood, when initial plans are confronted with the experiences of new social roles and contexts, recalibration of initial plans in some domains is likely (Schulenberg, Bryant, & O'Malley, 2004). The goals that adolescents once aspired to reach may no longer seem important, and new goals take their place. College students' departure from college can illustrate several ways that goals may change during the transition to adulthood. A successful college student who enjoys her classes has no particular reason to change her goal of graduation because she is engaging in goal striving and reducing the discrepancy between her ideal self and real self. However, if she takes a summer internship that she enjoys and is offered a full-time position, she may decide to replace her goal of college graduation with the goal of starting her career. A pre-medical school student who is receiving poor grades in science courses might engage in compensatory secondary control and switch majors, or she might drop out of college completely.

## Goals and Well-Being

Having an important life goal and reaching one's goals are positively related to well-being (Freund & Baltes, 2002; Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 1997; Sheldon & Cooper, 2008; Smith, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2007; Wiese, 2007). However, developmental theories related to goal setting and striving suggest that there are complex longitudinal relations between goals and well-being. Even though having goals is positive for well-being, the discrepancy between the ideal goal state and current reality is theorized to create negative affect (Carver et al., 1996). When individuals can reduce the discrepancy through goal striving or goal revision, the negative affect is reduced. However, if individuals do not engage in either goal striving or goal revision, or if neither process is successful, then individuals may experience poorer well-being (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002; Heckhausen et al., 2001). Furthermore, during the process of goal striving, individuals may experience setbacks or roadblocks to the goal that are stressful and damaging to well-being (Sellers & Neighbors, 2008). This stress is particularly evident for individuals who perceive the obstacle as something that cannot be overcome.

Although we are beginning to understand more about how goal striving and achievement processes are related to well-being over time, little research has examined the developmental course of goal disengagement. Sheldon (2008) reported that goal achievement is not only related to concomitant well-being, but also predicts well-being several years after goal achievement is measured. Schulenberg et al. (2004) showed that the accomplishment of developmental tasks related to achievement and affiliation during the transition to adulthood corresponded with positive trajectories of well-being. However, little else is understood about longitudinal trajectories of well-being as they relate to goals. Thus, this study examines the course of well-being during the transition to adulthood, as a function of goal completion, striving, and disengagement. In this U.S. national longitudinal study, we take a person-centered approach by examining groups of youth who meet or do not meet their personal life goals across adolescence and into young adulthood.

We compare trajectories of these groups in terms of their subjective well-being and self-efficacy in domains relevant to their goals. We expect that individuals who meet their life goals would report higher well-being than individuals who fail to meet their life goals. In addition, we expect that individuals who do not meet a life goal and later discount the goal would maintain high levels of well-being and self-efficacy. When individuals disengage from their goals, they are able to reduce the discrepancy between their actual selves and their ideal selves and maintain a sense of self-worth and well-being. In contrast, we expect that continued goal striving that has not yet yielded success will maintain an uncomfortable discrepancy between actual and ideal selves, thus lowering well-being.

## Method

Data for this study were obtained from national longitudinal panels of the Monitoring the Future Project (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2008). At modal age eighteen, nationally representative samples of approximately 17,000 high school seniors completed self-report questionnaires in classroom settings every year since 1976; data used for this study include consecutive cohorts of high school seniors from 1976 through 1994. Each year, a random sample of approximately 2,400 respondents was selected to complete biennial mail surveys. One random half of the sample was surveyed at ages nineteen, twenty-one, twenty-three, twenty-five, and twenty-seven. The other random half was surveyed at ages twenty, twenty-two, twenty-four, twenty-six, and twenty-eight. Measures of interest here are located on only one of six randomly distributed questionnaire forms, proportionally reducing the available sample size.

This study uses data from approximately 5,693 youth who participated in a follow-up survey at age twenty-seven/twenty-eight (N was weighted to account for sampling effects). Consistent with national demographics over the past several decades, slightly over half of the sample is female, 11 percent are African American, 7 percent are Latino or Hispanic, 3 percent are Asian American, and 74 percent are European American.

## Measures

**Life goals.** High school seniors' life goals were determined from their self-reported aspirations for graduation from a four-year college, marriage, and parenthood. Only statistically normative goals in these three domains were examined, and subsamples for each of the analyses included only eligible adolescents who (a) expected to graduate from a four-year college, (b) expressed a desire to get married, or (c) wanted to become a parent.

**Completion of life goals.** Realization of life goals was determined by examining educational attainment, and marital and parental status at age twenty-seven/twenty-eight. Eligible respondents' educational goals were met if they reported having completed a four-year college degree in either of two places on the questionnaire. Marital life goals were met if respondents reported being married (rather than single, divorced, or separated), and parenthood goals were met if they reported having one or more children.

**Continued goal striving.** For eligible individuals who had not yet completed their life goal(s) at age twenty-seven/twenty-eight, we created a measure to assess the state of their goal striving. Continued goal striving was indicated by continuing to hold the same life goal at age twenty-seven/twenty-eight as at age eighteen. Individuals who, at age twenty-seven/twenty-eight, no longer held the same life goal(s) as they did at age eighteen were considered to have disengaged from their goals.

**Dependent measures** consisted of items on five-point Likert-type scales. They included four measures of well-being tracked biennially from ages eighteen through twenty-seven/twenty-eight. These were overall life satisfaction, global self-efficacy, self-satisfaction, and self-esteem. We also examined three forms of self-efficacy for domains related to individuals' life goals: self-efficacy as a spouse, as a parent, and as a worker. Analyses also controlled for three demographic characteristics: gender, senior-year cohort, and parents' average educational attainment.

## Results

We used a series of repeated-measures multivariate analyses of covariance to determine how goal completion and goal striving were related to the trajectory of well-being and self-efficacies across late adolescence and the transition to adulthood. We examined relations of each of the three domains of life goals with each of the measures of well-being; given space constraints, we only discuss those that were significantly related.

**Goal Completion.** All four dependent well-being measures varied by goal completion, though not for all types of life goals. We begin with ways in which well-being was related to educational goal completion. The trajectory of global self-efficacy differed by educational goal completion ( $p < .01$ ). Global self-efficacy was similar for individuals who achieved their goal of graduating from a four-year college and those who did not until age twenty-four; at later ages self-efficacy was higher among those who had met their goal than among those who had not (see Figure 3.1a).

In terms of cross-content relations, there was also a difference in young adults' self-efficacy as a spouse depending upon whether they had met their educational goals by age twenty-seven/twenty-eight ( $p < .01$ ). Specifically, individuals who had met their goal to graduate from college by age twenty-seven/twenty-eight had higher self-efficacy as a spouse than those who had not (not shown).

Next, we turn to well-being as it relates to marital goal completion. The trajectory of overall life satisfaction differed by marital goal completion ( $p < .001$ ). The difference in life satisfaction between individuals who had become married by age twenty-seven/twenty-eight and those who had not varied significantly at age eighteen, and this gap increased between ages eighteen to twenty-eight. The life satisfaction of those who met their marital goal became higher, while life satisfaction stayed low for those who had not married (see Figure 3.1b).

Satisfaction with oneself also differed by marital goal completion ( $p < .05$ ). At age eighteen, individuals who later met their goal to become married were more satisfied with themselves than individuals who were not married by age twenty-seven/twenty-eight. At age nineteen/twenty, this gap disappeared and individuals' satisfaction with themselves did not differ by marital goal completion. At older ages (twenty-three to twenty-eight), individuals who had met their goal to become married were again more satisfied with themselves than individuals who had not married by age twenty-seven/twenty-eight (see Figure 3.1c).

Change over time in self-esteem also differed by marital goal completion ( $p < .05$ ). Self-esteem did not differ among individuals at ages eighteen to twenty-two. From ages twenty-three to twenty-eight, individuals who had married expressed more self-esteem than individuals who had not (see Figure 3.1d).

As was true with educational goals, there were important cross-content relations between domain-specific self-efficacy and meeting marital goals by age twenty-seven/twenty-eight. Specifically, self-efficacy as a spouse ( $p < .01$ ), self-efficacy as a parent ( $p < .05$ ), and self-efficacy as a worker ( $p < .05$ ) all differed by marital goal completion. In each case, domain-specific self-efficacies were higher among individuals who had met their goal to get married than among those who had not married yet.

Finally, regarding parenthood goals, there were no relations between well-being and parenthood goal completion, though self-efficacy over time was related to whether individuals became parents. Specifically, self-efficacy as a spouse differed by parenthood goal completion ( $p < .001$ ) as well as marital goal completion ( $p < .01$ ). In these two cases, individuals who had met their goal to become a parent by age twenty-seven/twenty-eight had higher self-efficacy than those who had not. In addition, self-efficacy as a worker differed by parenthood goal completion ( $p < .05$ ); however, in contrast to the other relations with self-efficacy, this measure was higher during the late twenties for individuals who had not met their goal to become parents than for individuals who had already become parents.

**Continued Goal Striving and Well-Being.** Next, we examined well-being among only those individuals who had not met their educational, marital, or parenthood goals by age twenty-seven/twenty-eight to determine whether it varied as a function of their continued goal

striving or goal disengagement. Two measures of well-being in this study, self-satisfaction and self-esteem, did not differ by individuals' continued endorsement of goals that they had not met. One measure, overall life satisfaction varied over time as a function of individuals' continued endorsement of educational goals ( $p < .01$ ). However, life satisfaction only differed at age nineteen/twenty, when individuals who continued to hold their educational goal at age twenty-seven/twenty-eight had higher life satisfaction than those who no longer expected to graduate from a four-year college at age twenty-seven/twenty-eight (Figure 3.2a).

The other two measures of well-being over time were found to vary in relation to whether individuals continued to endorse marital goals. First, overall life satisfaction differed by continued endorsement of marital goals ( $p < .05$ ). Specifically, individuals who, at the age of twenty-seven/twenty-eight, continued to expect that they would marry were more satisfied with their lives at the ages of twenty-one to twenty-eight than individuals who no longer expected to marry at the age of twenty-seven/twenty-eight (Figure 3.2b). Second, global self-efficacy changed differently among individuals who kept high expectations to marry than among individuals who reduced their marriage goals ( $p < .05$ ). Among individuals who had not met their marital goal, those who still held high expectations to marry held higher global self-efficacy when they were nineteen/twenty years old and again when they were twenty-five to twenty-eight years old than those who reduced their expectations (see Figure 3.2c).

**Continued Goal Striving and Self-Efficacies.** Our final step was to examine the domain-specific self-efficacies of individuals who had not met their goals by age twenty-seven/twenty-eight to determine whether they differed during late adolescence and the transition to adulthood as a function of individuals' use of compensatory secondary control (i.e., goal disengagement). We also examined trajectories of self-efficacies as a spouse, parent, and worker as further evidence of compensatory secondary control.

Self-efficacy as a worker was unrelated to continued endorsement of life goals. For individuals who had not met their educational goals, self-efficacy as a spouse differed in relation to whether they continued to hold their educational goals at age twenty-seven/twenty-eight ( $p < .05$ ). Specifically, self-efficacy as a spouse was higher at age twenty-three/twenty-four (23/24) and again at age twenty-seven/twenty-eight among those who continued to hold their educational goal, compared to individuals who no longer expected to graduate from a four-year college (see Figure 3.3a). For individuals who had not met their goal to become married, their self-efficacies as a spouse ( $p < .001$ ) and as a parent ( $p < .001$ ) differed as a function of whether they continued to endorse a marriage goal or not. Self-efficacy as a spouse was equivalent among the groups at age eighteen and remains high over time for individuals who continue to hold goals for marriage, but decreased over time for individuals who no longer held goals for marriage by the time they were twenty-seven/twenty-eight (see Figure 3.3b). For individuals who continued to hold marital goals at age twenty-seven/twenty-eight, self-efficacy as a parent remained higher throughout late adolescence and the transition to adulthood than the self-efficacy as a parent of individuals who disengaged from their marital goals (see Figure 3.3c). Self-efficacy as a spouse differed by continued parenthood goals ( $p < .001$ ). For individuals who maintain goals for parenthood



despite not meeting those goals by age twenty-seven/twenty-eight, self-efficacy as a spouse increased slightly, and then leveled off. For individuals who have reduced their goals for parenthood, self-efficacy remained stable at first and then decreased (see Figure 3.3d). The two groups differed significantly at age nineteen/twenty and again at ages twenty-three to twenty-eight.

In addition, the trajectory of self-efficacy as a parent differed by continued parenthood goals ( $p < .001$ ). Individuals who reduced their parenthood goals reported decreased self-efficacy as a parent over time, in contrast to individuals who maintained their parenthood goals and whose self-efficacy as a parent remained stable (see Figure 3.3e).

In sum, individuals who had not met their life goals by age twenty-seven/twenty-eight but who maintained those goals had higher self-efficacies for roles in the goal domains than individuals who had disengaged from their life goals. In addition, individuals' specific self-efficacies in related domains were also lower for those who disengaged from their life goals than for those who continued to strive to complete them.

## Discussion

**Goal Attainment and Well-Being.** Consistent with our hypotheses, meeting a goal in an important life domain is related to greater well-being during emerging adulthood. Our expectations regarding the positive relation between goal completion and well-being held true regarding goal completion in the educational and marital domains, but not the parenthood domain. The socially acceptable time line for graduating from a four-year college falls within the time period of eighteen to twenty-eight years old, so the finding that college graduation is related to well-being is perhaps the most straightforward example of this phenomenon.

Although completing one's goal to marry was related to well-being, it was impossible for us to separate the effect of completing one's marital goal from the effect of gaining a partner who provides social and emotional support. Past research has shown that individuals who marry tend to be happier than individuals who remain single, and that marriage is preferable to divorce in terms of well-being (Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000; Stutzer & Frey, 2006). Thus, what appears to be a relation between becoming married and having higher well-being may be an effect of an expanded social group or support network.

Although we did not find relations between parenthood goal completion and well-being during the transition to adulthood, this is not evidence that the process of parenthood goal completion is necessarily different than the process of completing other goals. Rather, we believe that there may be relations between parenthood goal completion and well-being later in life. The average age of first parenthood in the United States has historically been higher than the average ages of educational completion and first marriage (Crockett & Bingham, 2000; Greene, 1990). Thus, respondents may have planned to start trying to conceive after the age of twenty-eight. It may be that respondents approached or passed their "developmental deadline" for college graduation and marriage by age twenty-eight, but had not passed their deadline for childbearing by this age.

Continued Goal Striving and Well-Being. We also found that there were significant relations between the goal approach that individuals took when they had not yet met their goal (i.e., continued goal striving vs. disengaging from the goal) and their well-being during the transition to adulthood. In the few cases in which individuals' approaches to their previous goals were significantly related to their well-being trajectories during the transition to adulthood, we found that continued goal striving was related to higher well-being than goal disengagement. These results are similar to the results of a study by Wrosch, Heckhausen, and Lachman (2000), which showed that lowered aspirations were related to lower well-being. Wrosch et al. (2000) suggest that lowered aspirations accompany failure and loss, and are correlated with higher levels of stress.

These findings are inconsistent with our original hypotheses that individuals who had disengaged from their previous goals would have higher well-being than those who continued to pursue their goals. It is possible that the timing of goal striving vs. goal disengagement plays a role in the effect of goal approach on well-being. Early goal disengagement, such as disengagement before the developmental deadline, might indicate greater pessimism or perceived lack of control in one's life compared to goal disengagement at or shortly after the developmental deadline.

Finally, we found evidence of compensatory secondary control, or psychological revision, among individuals who disengaged from the goals that they previously held in important life domains. This was consistent with our hypotheses. Compared to individuals who maintained their goals, individuals who disengaged from their goals reported decreases in their self-efficacy in the goal domain and in other specific domains. These effects were most obvious in the parenthood and marriage domains, areas in which an individual's goals may be more closely related to each other than they are to educational goals.

Although our theoretical framework suggests that goal completion, goal striving, and goal disengagement are the more dominant causes behind the relation between goals and well-being, we also found several pieces of evidence that suggest well-being precedes goal completion and goal striving. First, there were several cases of a difference in well-being at age eighteen, before goal completion occurred. This suggests that being more satisfied with one's life and with oneself has the potential to increase one's chances of fulfilling a goal to, for example, marry. Second, having higher domain-specific self-efficacy in late adolescence or the early twenties was related to meeting one's goals. In a social-cognitive framework (i.e., Bandura, 2001; Eccles et al., 1983), having a sense that you will be successful when your goal is met (that is, that once you become a parent you will be a good parent, or once you graduate from college you will be a good worker) provides motivation during the goal-striving process.

These results suggest that the relation between well-being and goal completion may be due, in part, to a general resilience or positive outlook on life and one's future. This is consistent with other research, which has found that adjustment predicts goal attainment (Sheldon, 2008).



## Future Directions

One of the drawbacks of this study is that we were only able to examine relations between goal striving and well-being over ten years, rather than following participants into their thirties when more of their life goals might be met. Disengagement from unmet goals in these life domains, especially parenthood, may be premature by age twenty-eight. If so, then goal disengagement that appears to be adaptive or at least not maladaptive during the transition to adulthood may actually be associated with poorer domain-specific well-being or longitudinal declines in well-being as individuals age into middle adulthood. Furthermore, the effects of parenthood goal striving, disengagement, and completion, which were largely nonsignificant in this study, may be more pronounced in a sample of adolescents followed further into adulthood. Therefore, one future direction of research needed in this domain is additional life span developmental research.

As the life course becomes longer and less structured, we may continue to see extensions of the developmental horizons relevant to adolescents and young adults. As the developmental deadlines for goals in those life domains change, the age at which compensatory secondary control would optimally begin will change as well. Thus, comparisons of cohorts from different historical periods will shed light on interesting societal shifts in goal setting and goal pursuit.

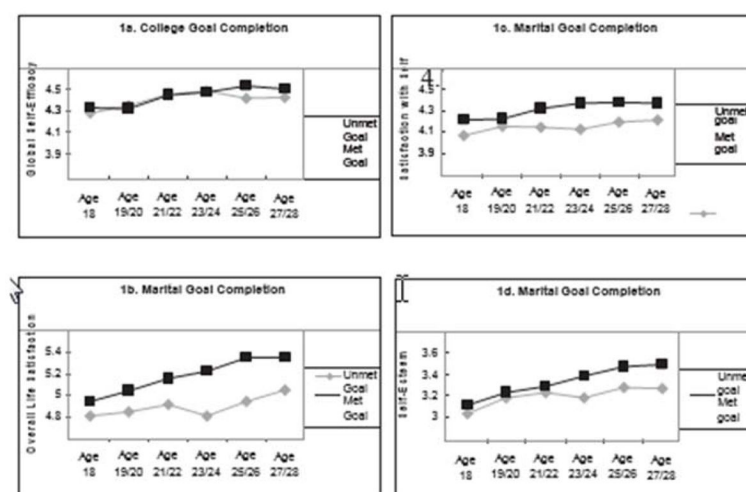
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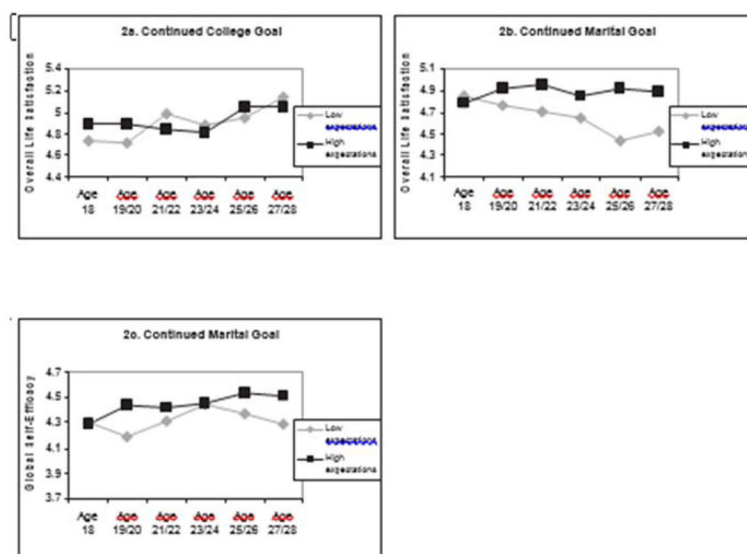
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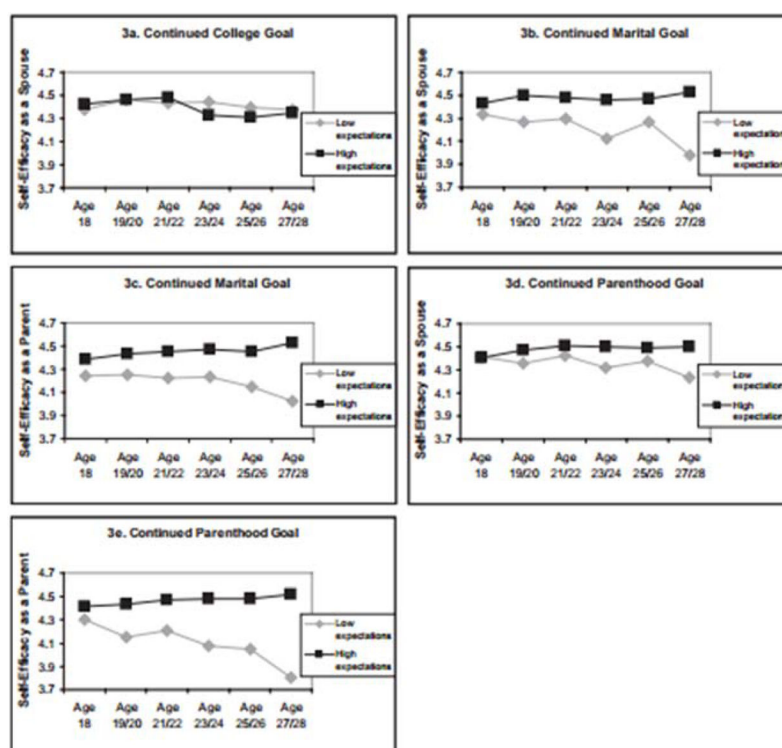
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**Figure 3.1.**  
Goal Completion by Age Twenty-Seven/Twenty-Eight and Well-Being During the Transition to Adulthood [a–d]

**Figure 3.2.**

Continued Goal Striving at Age Twenty-Seven/Twenty-Eight and Well-Being During the Transition to Adulthood [a–c]



**Figure 3.3.**  
Continued Goal Striving at Age Twenty-Seven/Twenty-Eight and Related Beliefs During the Transition to Adulthood [a–e]